

The Relevance of the Past

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HISTORY IS NOT A CHRONICLE but a Hebrew invention about the way the cosmos works, a notion that became the accepted “word” for the civilized world. One of the problems with this version is that it does not see the past reoccurring in the present. Yet Octavio Paz reminds us: “The past reappears because it is a hidden present. I am speaking of the real past, which is not the same as ‘what took place.’ . . . What took place is indeed the past, yet there is something that . . . takes place but does not wholly recede into the past, a constantly returning present.”¹ History as written documentation of “what happened” is antithetical to a “constantly returning present,” and as a result its perception of time and change is narrowly out of harmony with the natural world. Written history is the word. Time is an unfinished, extemporaneous narrative.

Prehistoric humans, in contrast, were autochthonous, that is, “native to their place.” They possessed a detailed knowledge that was passed on from generation to generation by oral tradition through myths—stories that framed their beliefs in the context of ancestors and the landscape of the natural world. They lived within a “sacred geography” that consisted of a complex knowledge of place, terrain, and plants and animals embedded in a phenology of seasonal cycles. But they were also close to the earth in a spiritual sense, joined in an intricate configuration of sacred associations with the spirit of place within their landscape. Time and space as well as⁷ animals—humans—gods—all life and nonliving matter formed a continuum that related to themes of fertility and death and the sacredness of all things.² During prehistory, which is most of the time that humans have been on earth, the dead and their burial places were venerated and mythic ancestors were part of the living present, the dreamtime ones whose world was also the ground of present being. Ignore them as we will, they are with us still.

The roots of history as written, as Herbert Schneidau has shown us,³ were formulated by the Hebrew demythologizers who created a reality outside the rhythmic cosmos of the gentiles who surrounded them and who were grounded in prehistoric, mythical consciousness with rituals of eternal return, mimetic conveyance of values and ideas, the central metaphor of nature as culture, and, most of all, the incorporation of the past into the present. Unlike history, prehistory does not participate in the dichotomy that divides experience into good and evil, eternal and temporal. Rather, it belongs to a syncretic system that accepts multiple truths and meanings and attempts to reconcile them. This state of consciousness is not due to a rational process. The mythic mind, as John Cobb Jr. has explained it, does not recognize the “separateness of subject and object” but instead sees “a flow of subjective and objective contributions . . . bound together” where there is no “clear consciousness of subject as subject or of object as object.”⁴

The Hebrews, who initiated the move away from the earth and toward the historical view, did not try to reconcile opposing beliefs. Nor did they have a sense of place. To the contrary they insisted on “deracination from the spirit of place” and asserted that they were “journeyers” to the Promised Land.⁵ In the Hebrew view, the realm of the sacred was granted only to Yahweh. Objections to the oldest traditions of time and the past imply a deeper strain that has to do not with the content of history, but with a self-conscious alienation that first became evident in the Hebrews. The assault on the local wisdom of primal peoples culminated in the outwardness of nature and the inwardness of the personality.

Focusing on heavenly domination over earthly phenomena, history became an attempt to look away from earth. The Hebrews and the 8 *Coming Home to the Pleistocene* Greeks, who were their contemporaries and whose parallel culture in the Eastern Mediterranean shares many common features with that of the Hebrews,⁶ saw alienation as the touchstone of humankind. They understood themselves as outside the nature-centered belief systems of other peoples, whose cosmologies linked past, present, and future in stories and art with eternal cycles and sacred places. History is a way of perceiving

human existence that opposes and destroys its predecessor, the mythic world, which sees time as a continuous return and space as sacred, where all life is autochthonous. The Hebrew and Greek founders of history were not so intent on rejecting nature as they were on understanding temporal events as unique. The Hebrews, the Greeks, and, following in their steps, the Christians asserted that events are novel, uncertain, tangential, and contingent rather than embedded and structured, the result of the thoughts of a living, omniscient, unknowable God. The past was a highway on which there could be no return.

The prototype of this linear sequence of ever-new events, where nothing was repeated and to which nothing returned, was the *Old Testament*, a record of tribal endogamy, identity, and vision. Thirty-two hundred years later, history has grown fat with the civilized written records that replaced oral traditions and added vast secular data to

religious history. This breakaway from the mythic life, which linked our species to the natural world, began when the early Hebrews rejected the nature/process stories and rites of their pagan contemporaries for the myth of a single god who, outside the world, reached into his creation, willfully deranging its rhythms, acting arbitrarily, making life a kind of novel, a history. The effort of the Hebrews to distance themselves from the sacred immanence in the natural order initiated what Cobb has called the “reflective consciousness” of humankind in the “Axial Period” (between 800 and 200 B.C.)—a transitional state of human cognition in which the archaic mind was altered and a “conscious control of symbolization and action” emerged.⁷ Although the Hebrews had begun to develop a “reflective consciousness,” a state of consciousness in which they actively attempted to understand their place in the greater scheme of things, they were still *The Relevance of the Past*⁹ locked into a kind of projection of their unconscious that symbolized subjective elements arising from a deep substratum of the mind.

The Greeks, Cobb argues, succeeded in distancing themselves from sacred immanence in the natural order through further development of the “reflective consciousness.” The change of the “structure of existence,” the way they envisioned the possibilities in their lives, moved from the unconscious to the conscious. In the case of Homeric Man, “the object of conscious experience . . . was primordially the sensuously given world . . . in which the subjective was subordinated to the objective.” Out of this grew “esthetic distancing”—an ability to see beauty in the world, in nature, in the human body, and in temples and other human artifacts, esthetically pleasing forms corresponding to rational psychic structures. By esthetic projection of beauty and perfection onto their gods, Cobb says, “the Greeks subordinated mythical meanings to the rational consciousness. . . . Gods were conceived as visual objects” and an “intelligible order” was imposed on the myths. In this way the mythical became the mythological. Things could be treasured for their beauty as opposed to their utility or their numinousness. Careful study of the objects of art resulted in “demonstrated laws of form and quantitative mathematical laws,”⁸ which allowed replication and thus the development of mathematics, natural science, philosophy, drama, and performance music. Science and esthetics emerged together—invented for the West, so to speak, by the Greeks. Greatness was equivalent to excellence and beauty rather than to morality. The gods became drama and sculpture; nature was reduced to the sensed source of intellectual description and artistic power.

For Christians the crucial events “on earth” were finished except for a final judgment. Christian existence was defined as spiritual existence that expressed itself through “radical responsibility for oneself” as well as “selftranscendence” through love of others.⁹ Christians further emphasized the distinction between the word of a patriarchal god and all myths of an earth mother—thereby separating themselves even more from the numinous earth and its processes.¹⁰ Individual responsibility for self-scrutiny in terms of sin or good works took precedence over the timeless sacredness of the earth and its processes. The notion of the unreturning arrow of historical time in the Western mind was taken up by Christianity. ¹⁰

OUR HUNGER FOR HISTORY, our obsession with it, is exacerbated by the lack of meaning in our own personal experience created by the historical attitude. Herbert J. Muller presents us with a paradox: “Our age is notorious for its want of piety or sense of the past. . . . Our age is nevertheless more historically minded than any previous age.”¹¹ Anxiety about our circumstances, and our identity, grows more acute the more we burrow into that sand dune of the written past. The nature of the primitive world is at the center of our modern anxiety about essence, appearance, and change because history cannot resolve for us the problem of change, which was mythically assured for many thousands of years as a form of renewal. Since we humans are not now what we once were—bacteria or quadruped mammals or apish hominids—other forms of life are irrelevant. The truth of history is that the more we know the stranger our lives become.

In the popular imagination our life in nature (everything outside this historical past) is in doubt, a shadowy and dangerous jungle from which we have escaped. In our search for ourselves, history narrows that identity to portraits, ideology, the adventure of power, and abstractions to which nations commit human purpose, to what feminists call “his-story.” Carlos Fuentes writes: “Before, time was not our own, it was providence’s own sphere of influence; we insisted on making it ours just so we could say that history is the work of man. . . . If such is the case we must make ourselves responsible for time, for the past and the future, because there is no longer any providence. . . . We must sustain the past, invent the future.”¹²

History, like a biased science, verifies rather than demonstrates. Whether its narrative is interesting or horrible, its events are irretrievable as personal experience. It deals with an arc of time and measured location. Its creative principle is external rather than intrinsic to the world. Deity is distant, unknowable, and arbitrary. The historical past is the equivalent of a distant place in a cosmos whose first law is that you cannot be two things, in two places, or in

two times, at once. It contradicts the fabulous tales, called “oral tradition,” about an endless return. Having shaken off the garment of myth and put on the robes of dry history, we gain the *The Relevance of the Past* II detachment and skepticism that define the Western personality and civilization.¹³

HISTORY REJECTS THE AMBIGUITIES of overlapping identity, space, and time and creates its own dilemmas of fragmentation and alienation—alienation from the domains of nonhuman life, primitive ancestors, tribal peoples, and the landscape itself. Living within this historic tradition, we find the meaning of life eluding us in certain significant ways.

Lacking a sense of the spiritual presence of plants and animals and of nonliving matter, we do not feel our ancestors watching or their lives pressing on our own as did prehistoric peoples. N. K. Sandars, an expert in prehistoric art, tells us that animals, as depicted in sculptures and cave art and reliefs, are never neutral. They carry meaning as “a profane source of food” but are also “sometimes a supernatural being, or even a god.”¹⁴ Historical consciousness gradually weeded out animal metaphors, organic continuities, and especially the perception of nonhuman spirits of the earth.

A repeated question of our time is, “How do we become native to this place?” History cannot answer this question, for history itself is the great de-nativizing process, the great deracinator. Historical time is invested in change, novelty, and escape from the renewing stability and continuity of the great natural cycles that ground us to place and the greater community of life on earth. As Norman O. Brown writes: “Man, the discontented animal, unconsciously seeking the life proper to his species, is man in history: repression and the repetition-compulsion generate historical time. Repression transforms the timeless instinctual compulsion to repeat into the forward-moving dialectic of neurosis which is history.”¹⁵

In this new “Space Age” we are antigeographical. Place no longer exists as the womb of our childhood and the setting of myth. The economic unity of humankind, the multinational corporation, and the technology of travel and communication join us to all parts of the earth yet leave us homeless. Being largely placeless, the “world religions” belong to history, where “going native” is a misanthrope’s hopeless escape or a “romantic nostalgia.” Like thankless children, failing to acknowledge our connection *12 Coming Home to the Pleistocene* to prehistory, we can live only in history, repressing our deep past as though it were an elemental irrelevance.

What was once the slow movement through habitats and terrains, enriched by narratives and the ongoing reciprocity with true residents, has been reduced to what Michael Sorkin calls “evocations of travel . . . places that refer to someplace else . . . the urbanism of universal equivalence,” and electronic simulacra. These false landscapes, such as Disneyland, instead of containing secret reflections of our individual maturity, yield immature adults whose mythology is Mickey Mouse. Nature becomes a stage where the regimes and tales of power are enacted. To conventional history, technocracy adds the planetary imperialism of franchise business and the wasted landscapes of industrial and nationalistic enterprise, recreation as sheer kinesthetic motion, and the vacuity of the escape industries—as Sorkin puts it, the “celebration of the existing order of things in the guise of escaping from it.”¹⁶

“Esthetic distancing,” a distilled and rarefied concept of art passed on in Western culture from the Greeks, has become in our times an obsession with abstractions. Gallery art, stage drama, concert music—all so profoundly admired—are abstractions based on a logic of form. Virtuosity has become identified with celebrity and artistic excellence. Participatory arts that were once part of everyday life have become performance with the majority of humans in a spectator role.

Music is fundamental to our wholeness, our sense of primordial multiplicity. But observe what has happened to it in our time. The exaggerated solemnity of music in temples, churches, and mosques is a measure of the loss of joy and of organic sound basic to hundreds of indigenous religions marked by “mythic” imagination, the use of the skin-and-wood drum and group improvisation. Making music is often completely absent in the lives of our children. Esthetic distancing also made possible the landscape arts and connoisseurship and commercialization as scenery painting, tourism, and recreation. To the credit of the Greeks, they resisted converting the landscape into scenery and wilderness into an aesthetic experience. In the sixteenth century pictorial space was invented by coupling mathematical perspective to painting. Nature itself became a kind of medium for highbrow entertainment, the pleasure derived would be ruled by artistic theory. The observer moved through life as though in a gallery.

Along with pictorial space and euclidean time, the phonetic alphabet was an inadvertent cause of estrangement. It made words an ultimate reality and the exposition of time linear—beginning with the bookkeeping mentality of the ancient Near East. The Mesopotamian desert-edge agrarians, and their “Persian” heirs of the mind, divided the world into material creation and infinite spirit that would shape the philosophy of the civilized world. Much of what we call “Western” has its roots in Hebrew supernaturalism and Greek hubris, behind which lurks the hieroglyphs of

barter.

Elsewhere I have tried to describe history as a crazy idea, fostered not as an intellectual concept so much as the socially sanctioned mutilation of

early childhood experience by blocking what Erik Erikson called “epigenesis,” the complicit outcome of inheritance and environment.¹⁷ Through education, history corrupts the intrinsic expectation of prehistory. Young children show natural tendencies that have always been part of the mythic mind as they personalize experience and show an intense interest in the natural world, especially in animals. They cling tenaciously to the proclivities that we try to educate out of them, the natural impulses that are the fundamental source of their creativity. Edith Cobb wisely said of childhood that its “purpose is to discover a world the way the world was made.”¹⁸ Children are in tune with that world. We personally experience childhood as a yearning, an intuition of the self, as other selves and other beings, a shadow of plant and animal kindred, vestiges of community that haunt us, and a need for exemplary events as they occur in myth rather than in history.

Most people most of the time in the history of civilization have lived under tyrants and demagogues, cued to despair and hopelessness. Today we are subject to progress, centralized power, entertainment, growth mania, and technophilia that produce their own variety of “quiet desperation.” This desperation arises not only from lack of attachment to place but also from lack of kinship with the larger community of all life on earth. History is not a neutral documentation of things that happened but an active, psychological force that separates humankind from the rest of nature because of its disregard for the deep connections to the past. It is a kind of intellectual cannibalism which creates from those different from us a target group that becomes the enemy, upon whom we project our unacknowledged fears and insecurities.

History’s judgment of the primitive world is a litany of excuses why we cannot go back: Time is irreversible. There are too many people on earth. Commitment to technology and its social and economic imperatives cannot be overturned. We cannot abdicate our hard-won ethical and moral achievements. Why surrender to a less interesting, cruder, or more toilsome life? History declares independence from origins and from “nature,” which is outside the human domain except as materials and the subject of science. Politics that considers our dependence on the health of Planet Earth a moral imperative gives in to the rapacity of self-indulgence and egomania. In Philip Slater’s words: “History . . . is overwhelmingly, even today, a narration of the vicissitudes of, relationships among, and disturbances created by those inflamed with a passion for wealth, power, and fame.”¹⁹

OUR WESTERN EXPLORATIONS on this continent—our attitudes and consciousness as depicted in our conquest of the land and its indigenous people and our art—have been influenced by an unacknowledged aspiration lodged deep in our psyches and passed on to us from our European forebears: the search for a lost paradise. This longing for a perfect world may be the greatest motivator of our insatiable desire for the “good life.” One wonders whether it is even possible for us to write about the past without a vagrant nostalgia for which perfect world that beckons to us but, so far as we can tell, never existed. History does not resolve our confusion but further misleads us with its mix of dreams and visions, infantile mnemonics, Golden Ages, Christian paradises, escapism, ethnographic misinformation, and fundamentalist attempts to make of it a mythology.

Christopher Lasch gets to the heart of our confusion: the distinctive conception of history is associated with “the promise of universal abundance.” Only in the twentieth century did we make “the belated discovery that the earth’s ecology will no longer sustain an indefinite expansion of productive forces.” The notion that recorded history is an unfolding of human capacities, that we are heirs “to all of the achievements of the past,” runs “counter to common sense—that is, to the experience of loss and defeat that makes up so much of the texture of daily life.”²⁰

Schneidau has told us that myths “do for the group some of the things that dreams do for individuals.” Myth and the unconscious are the sources through which we access our numinous past and ease ourselves out of fears and contradictions into “mental patterns that can be dealt with.”²¹ By discrediting the importance of myth, the ideology of history has corrupted basic human thought processes that have been enriched by myth since we became human. There has been an educated genuflection before the idea of myth since Carl Jung and then Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell attempted to demonstrate that myth is a narrative expression of universal internal archetypes. But, in general, myth has come into ill use and has been depicted as stories that are false, beyond comprehension, or unbelievable. “It is only a myth,” we say of stories too fanciful for reality. As a result of this general disrepute, it is difficult for many to credit “factual” history as the new myth of time and progress.

Jean-Paul Sartre argued that the dialectic way of approaching conflicting points of view by thoughtfully resolving contradictions is precisely what distinguishes civilization from the savage world. Sartre’s mistake, says Claude Lévi-Strauss, makes him no more sophisticated than a Melanesian native who insists that the only stories that truly explain

the world are his own. Lévi-Strauss argues that history is a myth because there is no possibility of recapitulating everything that happened, so history concocts its own story. Moreover, history is not a true sequence. It is fallacious to conceive history as a continuous development beginning with millennia and then going on to centuries, years, and days. These different time frames are separate domains, the larger units characterized by explanation, the smaller by information. As Lévi-Strauss points out, historical thought is analytical and concerned with continuity and “closing gaps and dissolving differences” to the point that it “transcends original discontinuity.”

In contrast “savage thought is analogical” and its main feature is “timelessness.” Lévi-Strauss characterizes the source from which the “savage mind” draws its knowledge as a room with “mirrors fixed on opposite 16 *Coming Home to the Pleistocene* walls, which reflect each other. . . . A multitude of images forms simultaneously, none exactly like any other, so that no single one furnishes more than a partial knowledge . . . but the group is characterized by invariant properties expressing a truth.”²² If not to the “historical consciousness” for the truest meaning of life on Planet Earth, then where are we to turn? Perhaps the prehistoric unconscious forms a better basis for the creation of a new history.

NOTES

1. Octavio Paz, *The Other Mexico: Critique of the Pyramid* (New York: Grove Press, 1972), p. 76.
2. Herbert N. Schneidau, *Sacred Discontent: The Bible and Western Tradition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), pp. 76–78.
3. Ibid.
4. John Cobb Jr. *The Structure of Christian Existence* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), p. 82.
5. Schneidau, *Sacred Discontent*, p. 77.
6. Cyrus H. Gordon, *The Common Background of Greek and Hebrew Civilizations* (New York: Norton, 1965), p. 19.
7. Cobb, *The Structure of Existence*, pp. 52–59.
8. Ibid., pp. 73–75.
9. Ibid., pp. 124–125.
10. Editor’s Note: As Schneidau has noted, the silence in the Bible about “the great dream of the mother goddess, which dominated the near East for many centuries,” speaks volumes. See Schneidau, *Sacred Discontent*, p. 62.
11. Herbert J. Muller, *The Uses of the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 38.
12. Carlos Fuentes, *Christopher Unborn* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989), p. 280.
13. Robert Hutchins, Preface to Mortimer J. Adler’s Hundred Great Books Series, *The Great Ideas* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952).
14. N. K. Sandars, *Prehistoric Art of Europe*, 2nd ed. (Middlesex: Penguin, 1985), p. 70.
15. Norman O. Brown, *Life against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1959), p. 93.
16. Michael Sorkin, “See You in Disneyland,” in Michael Sorkin, ed., *Variations on a Theme Park* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1992), pp. 205–232.
17. “Epigenesis” is a term used by Erik H. Erikson *The Life Cycle Completed: A Review* [New York: Norton, 1985], pp. 26–27 that he borrowed from embryology to denote the phenomena linked with a creature’s growth and development. See also my *Nature and Madness* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1982).
18. Edith Cobb, *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).
19. Philip Slater, *Earthwalk* (Garden City: Anchor, 1974), p. 156.
20. Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven* (New York: Norton, 1991), pp. 528–530.
21. Schneidau, *Sacred Discontent*, p. 7.
22. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), pp. 260–263.